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# Accountability Under No Child Left Behind

## Progress Toward Implementation

**T**he No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was designed to achieve an ambitious goal: *All children will be proficient in reading and mathematics by the 2013–2014 school year.* A key strategy for achieving this goal is accountability. The act holds states, schools, and districts accountable for student achievement, according to state standards and measured by state tests. NCLB's accountability strategy rests on several premises: (1) clear targets for academic outcomes will provide incentives for and indicators of improvement, (2) identifying low-performing schools will focus assistance where it is most needed, (3) information about student performance will enable stakeholders to make informed decisions about how best to serve the students, and (4) targeted assistance will stimulate school improvement.

Drawing on findings from two federally funded studies—the Study of State Implementation of Accountability and Teacher Quality Under NCLB and the National Longitudinal Study of NCLB—RAND Corporation researchers, in collaboration with researchers from the American Institutes for Research, assessed the progress of states, districts, and schools in implementing the accountability provisions of NCLB through 2004–2005. They found that states, districts, and schools had met most of the NCLB accountability requirements and that schools were making many efforts to improve student performance. About three-quarters of schools were making adequate yearly progress toward the goal of 100-percent proficiency, but one school in seven was identified for improvement because of repeated low performance. Most schools were receiving technical assistance, and districts or states were intervening with most schools identified for improvement, as they should according to the act. Many schools were having difficulty meeting the needs of students with special needs, such as those with disabilities or limited English proficiency.

### Abstract

Drawing on findings from two federally funded studies, researchers assessed progress in implementing the accountability provisions of NCLB through 2004–2005. They found that most schools were engaged in multiple efforts to improve performance and that states, districts, and schools had met most of the NCLB accountability requirements. About three-quarters of schools were making adequate yearly progress. Those not doing so were more likely to be high-poverty, high-minority, and urban schools. Many schools reported needing technical assistance to serve students with special needs, such as those with disabilities or limited English proficiency.

### State Standards and Testing Provide the Basis for Accountability

NCLB imposes several requirements on states to ensure accountability. Every state must have content standards for knowledge and skills in reading and mathematics. These standards are developed independently by each state. The states must administer tests in reading and mathematics for all students and for all student subgroups identified by the act. Subgroups include, for example, African-Americans, Asian/Pacific Islanders, whites, students with disabilities, and students with limited English proficiency. Subgroups are measured because the act is designed to ensure that all students reach proficiency, rather than allowing good performance by one subgroup to cancel out poor performance by another. The tests are required annually in grades three through eight and once in high school.

Every state must also develop its own targets for adequate yearly progress, based on state test results and other key indicators. States must also communicate school and district performance results to parents, teachers, and other stakeholders.

Those schools that do not make adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years are identified for improvement. They must receive technical assistance and, if they fail to meet targets repeatedly, are subject to increasingly severe consequences.

### **Most States Met Requirements, But Standards Vary**

In 2004–2005, all states had implemented content standards and were making progress toward meeting the 2005–2006 requirements for testing all students for proficiency in the required subjects and grades. Twenty-seven states and the District of Columbia had already instituted yearly testing in reading and mathematics in the third through eighth grades; the remaining 23 states and Puerto Rico were still working to implement the required testing by the 2005–2006 deadline. In addition, 20 states had not yet complied with requirements for testing English language proficiency.

However, student proficiency in the tested subjects has little common meaning across states. Because NCLB allows each state to determine the meaning of “proficient,” states vary widely in the levels at which they set their performance standards. Therefore, a student deemed to be proficient in one state might not be considered proficient in another.

### **Most Schools Made Adequate Yearly Progress, But with Some Problem Areas**

In 2003–2004, 75 percent of the nation’s schools made adequate yearly progress as defined by their states, a 2-percent increase from the prior school year. However, there was substantial variation among states. For example, 95 percent of schools in Wisconsin met progress targets, compared with only 23 percent of schools in Alabama and Florida. Differences among states were directly related to the states’ definitions of proficiency.

Of the 25 percent of schools that did not make adequate yearly progress, in just over half either the whole school or multiple student subgroups missed the mark. In schools in which all but a single subgroup met the mark, the subgroup was usually students with disabilities.

High-poverty, high-minority, and urban schools were less likely to make adequate yearly progress. The percentage of Title I schools identified for improvement grew from 12 percent in 2003–2004 to 18 percent in 2004–2005. More than one-third of high-poverty schools were identified for improvement, compared with only 4 percent of low-poverty schools. Similarly, more than one-third of schools with a

high concentration of minority students and more than one-fifth of urban schools were identified for improvement for repeatedly failing to make adequate yearly progress.

### **Nearly All Schools Were Engaged in Improvement Efforts**

NCLB requires states to establish support systems to help schools and districts identified for improvement. Nearly all states had done so. The most common types of support were school-support teams (such as experts in interpreting student assessment data and developing strategies) and school-improvement specialists. Most schools reported receiving the assistance they needed. However, for the schools that requested assistance for students with disabilities and those with limited English proficiency, half did not have their needs met.

Regardless of whether or not the school was identified for improvement, most schools were making efforts to improve curriculum and instruction, particularly to align those activities with standards. Three-quarters of schools offered extended instructional programs for at least some of their students. Two-thirds of schools used interim tests to monitor student performance during the school year. Nearly 90 percent of teachers used interim and state test results to improve instruction.

### **Implications for Future Policy**

These findings indicate considerable school-improvement activity and rapid implementation of NCLB requirements since 2001. Although states and schools have largely met accountability requirements, the researchers identified several key challenges:

- The numbers and percentages of schools identified for improvement varied considerably across states, in part because of differences among states in standards, assessments, and the definition of “proficiency.”
- The growing number of Title I schools identified for improvement may place a significant burden on state and district support systems.
- Little is known about the quality of local improvement efforts or the effectiveness of state technical assistance and interventions.

Looking ahead, policymakers will need to address these challenges to achieve the goal of proficiency in reading and mathematics for every student by 2014. ■

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This research brief describes work done for the U.S. Department of Education and documented in *State and Local Implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act: Volume III—Accountability Under NCLB: Interim Report*, by Kerstin Carlson Le Floch, Felipe Martinez, Jennifer O’Day, Brian Stecher, James Taylor, Andrea Cook, Georges Vernez, Beatrice F. Birman, and Michael S. Garet (available at <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/disadv/nclb-accountability/index.html>), 2007, 214 pp., also available as RP-1303 (<http://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP1303/>). The work was performed in RAND Education, a unit of the RAND Corporation. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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